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UNCLAS BOGOTA 004101

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SUBJECT: FUMIGATION IS WORKING: COM'S RESPONSE IN POLITICAL WEEKLY CAMBIO

¶11. (U) The Chief of Mission responded to press articles challenging the success of eradication efforts in Colombia, and calling for a change in policy in an article published by leading political weekly Cambio on its April 11-18 issue.

¶12. (U) BEGIN ARTICLE:

"There has been a lot of discussion surrounding the recent release of the U.S. coca and poppy cultivation estimates in Washington, including the estimate that coca hectarage did not change significantly in 2004 in spite of record fumigation levels. In fact, although it would have been nice if the hectare numbers had also gone down, last year, and every year for the last four years, the U.S. Colombian effort has had great success in what really matters here: reducing the amount of cocaine and heroin produced in Colombia.

When Plan Colombia began in 2001, Colombia alone had a potential production of an estimated 700 tons of pure cocaine. Today that figure is 430 tons. It declined by some 30 tons in 2004. Original goals for Plan Colombia included reducing the supply of Colombian cocaine by 50% over a five-year period, and we are approaching that goal.

We are also measuring more extensively. For the first time, the estimates include coca grown in national parks. Drug growers are destroying Colombia's natural patrimony and will continue to do so until they can be stopped. Recent aerial footage shows wide spread deforestation in the Sierra Macarena, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, and Choco due to drug cultivation. In just six national parks included in the study, there were almost 7,000 hectares of coca, and we believe there is much more in the protected areas. Between parks and other reserved areas, more than 10 percent of Colombia is off limits to spraying. And the drug growers are taking advantage of it. But we are on to them.

We are making the drug producers work harder. Because of our successful spraying, they are having to replant coca in record quantities and, even so, are not able to maintain production levels. Because newly planted fields do not yield the same production as mature fields, production levels dropped even though hectareage did not. This is expensive for the narcotraffickers and, we believe, ultimately unsustainable. Drug eradication is a war of attrition against determined, well-funded narcoterrorist organizations; we do not expect a knock-out blow, just that our opponent will get weaker and weaker until he disappears.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in keeping with our increased focus on heroin in 2004, opium poppy cultivation was reduced 52 percent, a huge success. Opium poppy cultivation fell steeply from an estimated 4,400 hectares in 2003 to 2,100 hectares in 2004. In 2001, Colombia was the largest producer of heroin in the hemisphere; that has not been true for two years thanks to our bilateral efforts.

The cooperation between the United States and the military, police, and civilian officials of Colombia is working and will continue to work. Last year our combined efforts led to record seizures and fumigation, and the lowest production of both coca and opium poppy in years. This is making life harder for the drug traffickers who spread addiction in the U.S., and form the basis for criminal and terrorist violence here in Colombia. Together, we will win."

END ARTICLE.

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